

Planning Challenges Facing Western North Carolina

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In many respects, the problems, hopes and possibilities of the mountain region of North Carolina today center around a centuries-old concern of mountain families: How can this generation protect and improve the quality of life of those who live in the region today and in the future? Thirty years ago, few residents or visitors to the mountain region would have specifically cited issues such as acid rain, air pollution, litter and visual blight, disposal of household and industrial wastes, or any of a dozen other impacts on the environment as critical concerns. They did, however, value the seemingly everlasting scenic beauty and natural resources offered by the mountains.

Over the past thirty years, the mountain region has become less isolated--many family farms have given way to factories, interstate highways, housing developments, golf courses and other modern-day land uses. Many of these changes were made to move the region into the twentieth century and to attempt to improve the quality of jobs, education, and recreation. Today, 21 million people visit the Blue Ridge Parkway each year; another 8.7 million visit the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Forest service officials estimate that over 27 million people visit the Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests. The increase in the popularity of ski resorts and top-quality golf courses in Western North Carolina further demonstrates the region's growing attraction as a destination point for outdoor recreation. In the 1980s, Rand McNally named Asheville the best small city in

which to live, and Hendersonville and Brevard were cited as two of the best small retirement cities in the nation. ("Our Land. . . Our Legacy Discussion Guide," Western North Carolina Tomorrow, Cullowhee, NC, 1992)

The growth of the region in the past thirty years has created problems. Since 1984, farmer-owned land in Western North Carolina has decreased by 22 percent, twice the state average, and private forest land has diminished by 16,000 acres. In many of the mountain counties absentee ownership exceeds 50 percent. As more people visit and move into the region, interest in protection against visual blight, incompatible land-uses, and poor road construction have increased, and concerns about environmental issues such as acid rain, air pollution, water quality and erosion control have grown.

This focus on protection of the region's resources has led to an increased emphasis on public discussion of land-policy issues. Since 1980, one of the regional organizations that has taken an active interest in public participation in critical issues related to land has been Western North Carolina Tomorrow (WNCT). This nonprofit organization, which covers the 17 westernmost counties of Western North Carolina, is composed of eighty citizen leaders with broad-based experience. WNCT has focused on the necessity of effective citizen participation in wise land-management decisions affecting the growth and prosperity of Western North Carolina. This includes support for the Mountain Ridge Protection Act (Ridge Law), sponsorship of regional training programs, and active involvement in related practical projects. To help local organizations increase discussion about rural land management, WNCT organized a series of community forums in western North Carolina. The series, entitled "Our Land. . . Our Legacy," received funding support from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and other organizations.

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WNCT's regional forum program provided community-level opportunities for public discussion about the complex issue of land use in Western North Carolina. Although no specific plan or action was promoted by WNCT in the forums, the programs helped raise awareness of the values and issues associated with land and its use. These community forums were held in September and October, 1992 and culminated with a regional conference, also sponsored by WNCT, at Lake Junaluska on November 10, 1992. The regional conference brought together key policymakers and participants from community forums to discuss issues raised at the meetings.

The forum programs attracted over 1,000 citizens from Western North Carolina. WNCT produced a fifteen-minute video to serve as a forum opener and encourage audience participation. The video presentation was not one of advocacy, but one of information. It offered contrasting viewpoints, and asked participants to respond to the question; "In your opinion, what role, if any, should your community, county, region and state government play in land-use planning?"

Responses to this question at both the community forums and regional conference provided information which WNCT shared with key state and regional officials, legislative study commissions and local policymakers and organizations.

Ten forums were held throughout western North Carolina, with each one cosponsored by at least one

local organization. Among the sponsoring organizations were chambers of commerce, citizen task forces, colleges, the League of Women Voters, planning boards, councils of government and the League of Property Owners. Although forums were held in specific counties, participants were not limited to those from that specific county. Participants were asked to follow a similar process at all forums. They were not encouraged to form a consensus, but were asked to list and discuss as many ideas as possible and to ensure that all had an opportunity to have their ideas recorded. In some cases, however, a consensus was generated. In others, a wide variety of ideas, issues and recommendations were formed, representing divergent views. The following list includes many of the key issues raised at a majority of the local WNCT land-use forums:

- There are differences between the mountain region and the other regions of the state. It is important for any programs designed for western North Carolina to recognize the unique characteristics of the region.
- Mountain people want to make recommendations and decisions about their own planning needs, rather than have those from outside the region tell them what to do.
- Any practical application of programs in planning--such as the development of a specific plan outlining



View of Lake Junaluska from the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference Center for the Methodist Assembly.

future needs--should be prepared and implemented at the local level, through the community, town or county.

- Both planning and regulatory programs should provide for a maximum of public participation at the most local level possible. It was recommended that the community level, as well as the county level, be involved in planning and regulatory programs in a specific way. Forum-type educational programs should be continued to extend discussion opportunities. Additionally, governments should develop a process to better inform people about existing regulations.
- Past state environmental regulation efforts have ignored local involvement and resulted in programs that were difficult to apply at the county level. The process used to develop the current watershed protection program was frequently listed as what not to do in the future.
- State laws or rules requiring each county plan with specific elements, should provide choices at the local level. Several groups recommended these choices include provisions similar to those of the North Carolina Ridge Law, which allowed counties to either follow the state requirements, pass a local program that is comparable to the state program, or offer local voters the option to do neither through a referendum.
- At each forum, some participants indicated that no additional effort should be undertaken by the community or state to promote planning or regulation. This view was dominant at one county forum.
- Governments should not mandate any programs--planning or regulatory--unless they provide resources to cover the costs involved in implementation.
- Groups at a majority of forums outlined roles for the state including: funding; setting broad guidelines; requiring that local governments plan; protecting natural or economic resources which are valuable to more than one county; providing incentives or disincentives; increasing information and education; increasing discussion of land use; and providing technical assistance.
- Effective planning efforts must be long-term rather than short-term. Sporadic efforts are of little use and, in some cases, cause harm. Communities, counties, and the region need a long-range vision. Future local planning projects promoted or established by the state should be three to five years in length, be adequately funded and be provided with necessary staff and equipment. Some current one-year efforts were considered unrealistic and under-funded, promoting no long-term commitments.

- Many forum participants lumped planning and regulation, such as zoning, together. In many forum groups, it was noted that planning does not have to mean zoning.

- Some citizens view planning as a tool used by others to regulate their land and reduce their rights. Many other citizens, however, believe planning is needed in western North Carolina to protect them, their property and the resources of future generations.

New plans and programs that are developed to guide future growth in western North Carolina must account for the concerns of mountain people. Measures for predicting the success of future planning or regulatory programs targeting the mountain region are essential. The following guidelines were developed from the WNCT forums.

Measures for Success of Land-Use Programs

1. Balance individual rights and protection of property rights for all community members.
2. Incorporate public participation at the community and county level (and, when appropriate, at the regional and state level) in both planning and implementation of the program.
3. Allow practical implementation in rural communities.
4. Provide equitable program application and regulation.
5. Recognize geographic differences in the state and addresses issues specific to the mountain region.
6. Address needs that have been locally identified rather than imposed from the state capital.
7. Establish the state's role as enunciating broad guidelines, representing regional or state concerns, and facilitating implementation, while delegating the development of specific plans and implementation strategies to the local community or county.
8. Provide realistic funding to assure full implementation at the state, regional, county and community levels.
9. Provide a formalized mechanism for periodic review and reassessment of local, regional and state goals and implementation strategies.

In developing programs, policy makers and planners must recognize the unique nature of western North Carolina. Using guidelines such as these, governments can design successful programs aimed at effectively managing growth in the region. CP